

Understanding Alzheimer's Disease

What You Need To Know

From the National Institute on Aging,
National Institutes of Health



Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| What's Inside..... | 3 |
| What Is Alzheimer's Disease?..... | 5 |
| Signs of Alzheimer's Disease..... | 6 |
| When To See a Doctor and What To Expect..... | 9 |
| Other Causes of Memory Problems..... | 11 |
| Treatments for Alzheimer's Disease..... | 12 |
| Research on Alzheimer's Disease..... | 14 |
| Help for Caregivers | 16 |
| Points To Remember..... | 18 |
| For More Information..... | 19 |
| Words To Know..... | 20 |

Use the Table of Contents to help find things quickly. You will also find medical terms in **bold**, such as **mild cognitive impairment**. Find how to say these words and what they mean in the “Words To Know” section on page 20.



What's Inside

Many older people forget someone's name or misplace things from time to time. This kind of forgetfulness is common with aging. But forgetting how to get home, getting confused in well-known places, or asking questions over and over can be signs of a more serious problem. Someone with these symptoms may have **Alzheimer's disease**. Alzheimer's is a brain disease that causes problems with memory and thinking. It slowly gets worse over time until a person can no longer do daily tasks by themselves.

This booklet will help you learn:

- What happens when a person has Alzheimer's disease
- Signs of Alzheimer's disease
- When to see a doctor
- Treatments for Alzheimer's disease
- How to get involved in research
- How to get help

Helen's Story



Helen has Alzheimer's disease. It took her a long time before she could even say the words. When the doctor first told her, Helen felt like her life was over. For a while, she was depressed. Helen's doctor told her about a medicine she could take that might slow down her memory loss. The doctor also told her about a support group she could join. It felt good to do something.

Helen's family has been wonderful. They're helping her plan for the care she'll need as her symptoms get worse. Helen has decided to take each day as it comes and live her life as fully as she can.

What Is Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's disease is an illness of the brain. It causes large numbers of brain cells to stop working properly. This affects a person's ability to remember things, think clearly, use good judgment, and, eventually, carry out daily tasks. Doctors don't know what causes Alzheimer's disease. They do know that for most people with the disease, symptoms first appear in their mid-60s or later.

Alzheimer's disease is a type of **dementia**, a term that describes the loss of the ability to think, remember, and reason. There are many types of dementia, but Alzheimer's is the most common.

What Happens When a Person Has Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's disease often starts slowly. In fact, some people don't know they have it. They assume their forgetfulness is because of old age. However, over time, their memory and thinking problems get more serious.

People with Alzheimer's have trouble doing everyday things like driving a car, cooking a meal, or paying bills. They may get lost easily and find even simple things confusing. Some people may become worried, angry, or violent.

As the illness gets worse, most people with Alzheimer's need someone to take care of all their needs, including feeding and bathing. Some people with Alzheimer's live at home with a caregiver while others live in assisted living or a nursing home.

Signs of Alzheimer's Disease

Memory problems are often one of the first signs of Alzheimer's disease. Symptoms vary from person to person. Some signs of the disease are listed below:

Early Signs

- Finding it hard to remember things
- Asking the same questions over and over
- Having trouble paying bills and working with numbers
- Getting lost
- Losing things or putting them in odd places

Middle Signs

- Forgetting how to brush your teeth or comb your hair
- Problems recognizing family and friends
- Emotional outbursts

Later Signs

- No awareness of recent experiences or surroundings
- Losing interest in eating, which may cause weight loss
- Difficulty speaking, swallowing, and using the bathroom

Mild Cognitive Impairment

Some older people have a condition called **mild cognitive impairment**, or MCI. It can be an early sign of Alzheimer's, but not everyone with MCI will develop Alzheimer's disease. People with MCI can still take care of themselves and do their normal activities. MCI memory problems may include:

- Losing things often
- Forgetting to go to events or appointments
- Having more trouble coming up with words than other people of the same age

If you think you might have MCI, ask a doctor to check for changes in your thinking, memory, and language skills.

Differences Between Alzheimer's Disease and Normal Aging

Use the chart below to help you understand the differences between Alzheimer's disease and the normal signs of aging.

| Normal Aging | Alzheimer's Disease |
|---|---|
| Making a bad decision once in a while | Making poor judgments and decisions a lot of the time |
| Missing a monthly payment | Problems taking care of monthly bills |
| Forgetting which day it is and remembering it later | Losing track of the date or time of year |
| Sometimes forgetting which word to use | Trouble having a conversation |
| Losing things from time to time | Misplacing things often and being unable to find them |

Rita's Story



A few months ago, Rita's mother, Vivian, started having trouble remembering things. Sometimes Vivian couldn't find the right words. Then, she got lost on her way home from the store. Rita knew something was wrong. She talked with her mom, and they decided to see the doctor.

The doctor asked about the changes Vivian and her daughter had noticed and did a medical exam. He also changed one of Vivian's medicines to see if that would make a difference. The doctor suggested that Vivian see a specialist who could test her memory and thinking skills. He said it was good that she had come in when she did instead of waiting, so they could start figuring out what the problem might be.

When To See a Doctor and What To Expect

If memory problems are getting in the way of your normal routine, it's time to see a doctor. Identifying the disease early gives you and your family more time to plan for your treatment and care.

A doctor or a specialist may do the following things to find out if someone has Alzheimer's disease:

- Give you a physical exam and ask about past medical problems
- Ask to see a list of all the medicines you take
- Ask questions about your family's health
- Ask how well you can do everyday things like driving, shopping for food, and paying bills
- Ask questions about your mental health to see if **depression** could be causing memory problems
- Talk with someone in your family about your memory problems
- Test your memory, problem-solving, counting, and language skills
- Check your blood and urine, and do other medical tests
- Take pictures with **brain scans** to look for signs of disease

People with memory problems should see a doctor every 6 to 12 months.

Linda's Story



Linda's neighbor Rose was always very active. She liked gardening and helping out at the local school. Rose and her husband enjoyed dancing and spending time with their grandkids. After her husband passed away, Rose began spending a lot of time alone at home. She seemed more and more confused.

Linda was worried that Rose had Alzheimer's disease and convinced her to see a doctor. It turns out that she didn't have Alzheimer's. Depression and not eating well were causing her problems. After seeing a counselor, taking medicine, and eating better, Rose seemed less confused and more like herself.

Other Causes of Memory Problems

Some medical conditions cause confusion and forgetfulness. The signs may look like Alzheimer's disease or another type of dementia, but they may be caused by other problems. Below are conditions that can cause serious memory problems:

- Bad reaction to certain medicines
- Emotional problems such as depression
- Not eating enough healthy foods
- Too few vitamins and minerals in your body
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Blood clots or tumors in the brain
- Head injury, such as a concussion from a fall or accident
- Kidney, liver, or thyroid problems

These conditions are serious and need to be treated. Once treated, your confusion and forgetfulness may improve.

Treatments for Alzheimer's Disease

There are medicines that can help manage the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. There are also new medications coming out to treat the disease.

Most medicines for Alzheimer's work best for people in the early or middle stages of the disease. For example, some medicines may help you keep your memory skills and ability to do everyday tasks for a period of time. Others may help if you have trouble sleeping or are worried and depressed. These medicines may have side effects and may not work for everyone.

Staying active, avoiding stressful situations, and creating a calm environment may also help people with Alzheimer's feel better.



Ed's Story



Ed's nephew told him about an Alzheimer's disease study at a nearby research center. Ed doesn't have memory problems now, but the disease runs in his family, so he worries about it. Ed called to find out about the study. The nurse asked him questions about himself and his family health history to see if he could join. Later, Ed and his wife set up a time to go to the research center.

Ed found that taking part in the study was interesting. He is excited that research like the study he joined could help find new treatments or even someday prevent Alzheimer's. Ed feels that being part of a study is important to help his family and others in the future.

Research on Alzheimer's Disease

Researchers are exploring how to find new and better ways to treat Alzheimer's disease. They are also looking at how to prevent Alzheimer's, catch it early on, slow the disease, and reduce its symptoms.

People with Alzheimer's disease or a family history of Alzheimer's may be able to take part in **clinical trials**, a type of research study. People without Alzheimer's who have no memory problems and no family history of Alzheimer's may also be able to take part in clinical trials. Studies need people from all backgrounds to participate to make sure the results are meaningful to everyone.

By volunteering for a clinical trial, you can become a partner in helping researchers discover ways to diagnose, treat, and prevent Alzheimer's disease.

To find out more about clinical trials and studies:

- Call the Alzheimer's and related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center at **800-438-4380**. It's a free call.
- Search for clinical trials and studies at **www.alzheimers.gov/clinical-trials**.
- Visit "NIH Clinical Research Trials and You" at **www.nih.gov/health/clinicaltrials** for more information on participating in research.

John's Story



John cared for his dad with Alzheimer's disease by himself for five years. But as his dad's symptoms got worse, John realized he needed help. John wasn't sleeping well and wasn't able to spend time with his other loved ones. He organized a family meeting with his siblings, and they figured out how to divide up the caregiving tasks. John and his siblings also decided to get help from a home health care agency. Now that he has time to take care of himself, John can take even better care of his dad and make the most of their time together.

Help for Caregivers

Help is available for caregivers. You don't have to do everything yourself. See the list below for ways to get help.

- Join a support group.
- Use adult day care services or arrange for a caregiver to come to your home for a short period of time.
- Ask friends and family to help with caregiving tasks.
- Get help from agencies that offer in-home care.
- Contact local and national groups for information about Alzheimer's disease.

Be sure to check out page 19 for groups and services that can help you.

Coping as a Caregiver

Caring for a person with Alzheimer's can involve highs and lows. You may feel good because you are taking care of someone you love. You may also feel overwhelmed. Being a caregiver can be even more difficult when the person with Alzheimer's gets angry with you, hurts your feelings, or forgets who you are. Sometimes, you may feel discouraged, sad, lonely, frustrated, confused, or angry. These feelings are normal.

Here are some things you can say to yourself that might help you feel better:

- I'm doing the best I can.
- What I'm doing would be hard for anyone.
- I'm not perfect, and that's okay.
- I can't control some things that happen.
- Sometimes, I just need to do what works for right now.
- I will enjoy the moments when we can be together in peace.
- Even when I do everything I can think of, my loved one will still have difficulty because of the illness, not because of what I do.

Take Care of Yourself

Each day brings new challenges. You may not even realize how much you have taken on because the changes can happen slowly over time. Taking care of yourself physically and mentally is important and may also offer you some relief. You can:

- Ask friends and family to help out.
- Do things you enjoy and spend time with friends.
- Take short breaks.
- Eat healthy foods and get exercise.
- Consider talking to a therapist or counselor.

Finding ways to make time for yourself can bring you some relief. It also may help keep you from getting ill or depressed.

Points To Remember

- Know the signs of Alzheimer's disease.
- See a doctor right away if you are worried about your memory problems.
- Talk with a doctor about medications and coping strategies.
- Consider joining a clinical trial.
- Know you can get help if you are caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease.

For More Information

NIA Alzheimer's and related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center

800-438-4380 / 711 (free relay service)

adear@nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers

The NIA ADEAR Center offers information and free print publications about Alzheimer's and related dementias for families, caregivers, and health professionals. ADEAR Center staff answer telephone, email, and written requests and make referrals to local and national resources.

Alzheimers.gov

www.alzheimers.gov

Visit Alzheimers.gov for information and resources on Alzheimer's and related dementias from across the federal government.

Eldercare Locator

800-677-1116

<https://eldercare.acl.gov>

Words To Know

Alzheimer's Disease

(**Allz**-high-merz duh-**zeez**)

A disease that causes large numbers of brain cells to stop working properly. These changes make it hard for a person to remember things, think clearly, and use good judgment. The symptoms begin slowly and get worse over time.

Brain Scans

(brayn skans)

A type of test a doctor may use to look for changes in the brain. While a person lies down, an instrument takes pictures to show normal and problem areas of the brain.

Clinical Trial

(**klin**-uh-kuhl **try**-uhl)

A research study to find out if new treatments are safe and effective. People with and without Alzheimer's disease can choose to take part in a clinical trial.

Dementia

(deh-**men**-shuh)

A term that describes the loss of the ability to think, remember, and reason. There are many types of dementia, but Alzheimer's is the most common.

Depression

(dee-**pressh**-uhn)

A serious medical illness that can be treated. Some signs of depression are:

- Feeling sad for more than a few weeks at a time
- Having trouble sleeping
- Losing interest in things you like to do

Depression can cause people to be confused and forgetful.

Mild Cognitive Impairment

(mild **kog**-ni-tiv im-**pair**-ment)

Also called MCI, it is a medical condition that causes people to have more memory problems than other people their age. The signs of MCI are not as severe as those of Alzheimer's disease. They include losing things often, forgetting to go to events and appointments, and having more trouble coming up with the right words than other people the same age.



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